The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20121118022715/http://www.michaelparenti.org:80/FreeSpee…

Free Speech—At a Price

From *Dirty Truths* by Michael Parenti

What does it mean to say we have freedom of speech? Many of us think free speech is a right enjoyed by everyone in our society. In fact, it does not exist as an abstract right. There is no such thing as a freedom detached from the socio-economic reality in which it might find a place.

Speech is a form of interpersonal behavior. This means it occurs in a social context, in homes, workplaces, schools, and before live audiences or vast publics via the print and electronic media. Speech is intended to reach the minds of others. This is certainly true of political speech. But some kinds of political speech are actively propagated before mass audiences and other kinds are systematically excluded.

Ideologically Distributed

In the political realm, the further left one goes on the opinion spectrum the more difficult it is to gain exposure and access to larger audiences. Strenuously excluded from the increasingly concentrated corporate-owned media are people on the Left who go beyond the conservative-liberal orthodoxy and speak openly about the negative aspects of big capital and what it does to people at home and abroad. Progressives people, designated as “the Left,” believe that the poor are victims of the rich and the prerogatives of wealthy and powerful interests should be done away with. They believe labor unions should be strengthened and the rights of working people expanded; the environment should be rigorously protected; racism, sexism, and homophobia should be strenuously fought; and human services should be properly funded.

Progressives also argue that revolutionary governments that bring social reforms to their people should be supported rather than overthrown by the U.S. national security state, that U.S.- sponsored wars of attrition against reformist governments in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Angola, and a dozen other countries are not "mistakes" but crimes perpetrated by those who would go to any length to maintain their global privileges.

To hold such opinions is to be deprived of any regular access to the major media. In a word, some people have more freedom of speech than others. People who take positions opposing the ones listed above are known as conservatives or rightwingers. Conservative pundits have a

remarkable amount of free speech. They favor corporations and big profits over environmental and human needs, see nothing wrong with amassing great wealth while many live in poverty, blame the poor for the poverty that has been imposed upon them, see regulations against business as a bureaucratic sin, and worship at the altar of the free market. They support repressive U.S. interventions abroad and pursue policies opposed to class, gender, and racial equality.

Such rightists as Rush Limbaugh, William F. Buckley Jr., John McLaughlin, George Will, and Robert Novak enjoy much more exposure to mass audiences than left liberals and populists like Jim Hightower, Jerry Brown, or Ralph Nader. And all of them, conservatives and liberals, enjoy more exposure than anyone on the more "radical" or Marxist Left.

It is the economic power of the rich corporate media owners and advertisers that provides right-wingers with so many mass outlets, not the latter's wit and wisdom. It is not public demand that brings them on the air; it is private corporate owners and sponsors. They are listened to by many not because they are so appealing but because they are so available. Availability is the first and necessary condition of consumption. In this instance, supply does not merely satisfy demand; supply creates demand. Hence, those who align themselves with the interests of corporate America will have more freedom of expression than those who remain steadfastly critical.

People on the Left are free to talk to each other, though sometimes they are concerned their telephones are tapped or their meetings are infiltrated by government agents and provocateurs-- as has so often been the case over the years. Leftists are sometimes allowed to teach in universities but they usually run into difficulties regarding what they say and write and they risk being purged from faculty positions. Likewise, they are free to work for labor unions but they generally have to keep their politics carefully under wraps, especially communists.

People on the Left can even speak publicly but usually to audiences that seldom number more than a few hundred. And they are free to write for progressive publications, which lack the promotional funds to reach mass readerships, publications that are perennially teetering on the edge of insolvency for want of rich patrons and corporate advertisers.

In sum, free speech belongs mostly to those who can afford it. It is a commodity that needs to be marketed like any other commodity. And massive amounts of money are needed to reach mass audiences. So when it comes to freedom of speech, some people have their voices amplified tens of millions of times, while others must cup their hands and shout at the passing crowd.

The Freedom of Power

We are taught to think of freedom as something antithetical to power. And there is something to this. The people's hard-won democratic rights do sometimes act as a restraint on the arbitrary power of rulers. But to secure our freedom we have to mobilize enough popular power to check state power. In other words, freedom and power are not always antithetical; they are frequently symbiotic. If one has no power, one has very little freedom to protect one's interests against those who do have power. Our freedoms are realities only so far as we have the democratic power to make them so.

People on the Left have freedom only to the extent they have rallied their forces, have agitated, educated, and organized strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations, and have fought back against the higher circles. They have no freedom to reach mass audiences because popular power and iconoclastic opinion have not penetrated the corporate citadels that control the mass communication universe.

We were never "given" what freedoms we do have, certainly not by the framers of the Constitution. Recall that the Bill of Rights was not part of the original Constitution. It was added after ratification, as ten amendments. When Colonel Mason of Virginia proposed a Bill of Rights at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, it was voted down almost unanimously (Massachusetts abstained). Popular protests, land seizures by the poor, food riots, and other disturbances made the men of property who gathered in Philadelphia uncomfortably aware of the need for an effective central authority that could be sufficiently protective of the propertied classes. But such popular ferment also set a limit on what the framers dared to do. Belatedly and reluctantly they agreed during the ratification struggle to include a Bill of Rights, a concession made under threat of democratic agitation and in the hope that the amendments would ensure ratification of the new Constitution.

So the Bill of Rights was not a gift from that illustrious gaggle of rich merchants, land and currency speculators, and slaveholders known as our "Founding Fathers." It was a product of class struggle. The same was true of the universal franchise. It took mass agitation from the 1820s to the 1840s by workers and poor farmers to abolish property qualifications and win universal White male suffrage. Almost a century of agitation and struggle was necessary to win the franchise for women. And a bloody civil war and subsequent generations of struggle were needed to win basic political rights for African Americans, a struggle still far from complete.

During the early part of the twentieth century a nationwide union movement in this country called the Industrial Workers of the World (the "Wobblies") struggled for the betterment of working people in all occupations. To win gains, the Wobblies had to organize, that is, they had to be able to speak out and reach people. To speak out, they had to confront the repressive tactics of local police who would beat, arrest, and jail their organizers. The Wobblies discovered that if they went into a town with five hundred people instead of five, then the sheriff and his deputies could do little to stop them from holding public meetings.

The right to free speech was established de facto during the course of class struggle. The Wobblie free speech fights were simultaneously a struggle for procedural democracy impelled by a struggle for substantive economic democracy. This fight continued into the Great Depression, as mass organization and agitation brought freedom of speech to hundreds of local communities, where police had previously made a practice of physically assaulting and incarcerating union organizers, syndicalists, anarchists, socialists, and communists.

So it went with other freedoms and democratic gains like the eight-hour day, Social Security, unemployment and disability insurance, and the right to collective bargaining. All such democratic economic rights, even though they may be seriously limited and insufficiently developed, exist to some degree because of popular struggle against class privilege and class power.

Freedom for Criminal Intelligence Agencies?

Like other freedoms, free speech is situational. It exists in a social and class context, which is true of democracy itself. Once we understand that, we can avoid the mistaken logic of a news columnist like Nat Hentoff who repeatedly attacks left activists who commit civil disobedience protesting CIA campus recruiters and military recruiters. Hentoff says they interfere with the freedom of speech of those students who want to talk to the recruiters (as if students had no other opportunity to do so). Hentoff also is worried that the CIA was having its rights abridged.

Such a view of freedom of speech has no link to the realities of human suffering and social justice, no connection to the realities of class power and state power, no link to the democratic struggle against the murderous force of the CIA, no acknowledgment that the CIA routinely suppresses the basic rights of people all over the world in the most brutal fashion. With a $25 billion yearly budget, with its tens of thousands of operatives unleashing death squads and wars of attrition against democratic forces and impoverished peoples around the world, with its control of hundreds of publications, publishing houses, and wire services, with thousands of agents pouring out disinformation, the CIA has more “free speech” than all those who protest its crimes—because it is backed by more money and more power.

With his tendency to treat rights as something apart from socio-economic realities, Hentoff would have us think that the CIA is just another participant in a campus democratic dialogue. In fact, the CIA is itself one of the greatest violators of free speech both at home and abroad. Those who take the one-dimensional Hentoff approach say nothing about the freedom of speech that millions might gain by shutting down the CIA and all such agencies of violence and repression, nothing about the lives that would be saved and the freedom salvaged in Third World countries that feel the brunt of the CIA onslaught.

By coercively limiting CIA recruitment, the campus demonstrators made a statement that goes beyond discourse and becomes part of the democratic struggle. By dramatically—through direct confrontation—questioning the CIA's legitimacy on college campuses and thereby challenging (even in a small way) its ability to promote oppressive political orders around the world, the demonstrators were expanding the realm of freedom, not diminishing it.

Of course, this has to be measured against the violations these same protestors commit, specifically the inconveniencing of some upper- and upper-middle-class students who don't want to have to travel off campus in order to ask CIA recruiters about pursuing a career of political crime. This latter right seems to weigh more heavily in Hentoff's mind than all the attendant misdeeds perpetrated by the CIA.

If we take Hentoff's position, then there can be no direct actions, no civil disobedience by the powerless against the established powerful because these would constitute infringements on the recruitment efforts of the CIA. Hentoff’s failure to deal with the power and wealth context of most of free speech leaves him in the ridiculous position of defending the CIA's freedom of speech—and worse, its freedom of action. It is the same position that led to the overthrow of the Fairness Doctrine: the poor corporate media bosses were being limited in their free speech because they had to grant it to others.

Struggle for More Democracy

If the Reagan-Bush-Clinton years have taught us anything, it is that our freedoms are neither guaranteed nor secure—unless we agitate and show our strength. If democratic struggle has

taught us anything, it is that our rights are not things that must be "preserved." Rather, they must be vigorously used and expanded. As with the physical body, so with the body politic: our capacities are more likely to grow if exercised and developed. Freedom of speech needs less abstract admiration and more militant exercise and application. Use it or lose it.

Democracy is not a “precarious fragile gift” handed down to us like some Grecian urn. Rather, it is a dynamically developing process that emerges from the struggle between popular interests and the inherently undemocratic nature of wealthy interests. Rather than fear an “excess of democracy” as do some of our media pundits and academic mandarins, we must struggle for more popular power, more victories for labor and human services, more victories against racism, sexism, and militarism, and against capitalism's apparent willingness to destroy the environment. And we need to muster more opposition to U.S. interventions around the world.

We must push for more not-for-profit economic development, more democratic ownership of productive forces and services, more ideological variety and dissidence in the mainstream media, more listener-controlled access to radio and television stations. In every field of endeavor we must learn to see the dimensions of the struggle that advances the interests of the many and opposes the interests of the outrageously privileged, overweening few; in other words, a struggle for more democracy, of the kind that brings an advance in social conditions for everyone, a socially conscious allocation of community resources for the sake of the community rather than for the greed of private investors, and an equalization and improvement of life standards that in effect brings less freedom for the CIA and the interests it serves but more freedom for the rest of us. Essential to such an agenda is a freedom of speech that is not limited to media moguls and their acolytes but is available to persons of all ideological persuasions.

Home | Books | Articles | Speaking Engagements | Recorded Talks | Biography

Copyright © 1992 - 2012 Michael Parenti. All rights reserved.